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Hybridization, Tradition, and Globalization: Musical Practices at the Crossroads of Cultures



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Abstract

This paper explores the phenomenon of musical hybridization in the context of globalization, examining how traditional, contemporary, and world music interact and influence one another. Through an analysis of cultural transmission, media influence, and artistic agency, we reflect on the transformations of musical languages and the redefinition of identity within a transnational artistic landscape.

* Artistic Hybridization

The contemporary world of media information is increasingly encompassing a wide range of domains of knowledge. In this digital age, the phenomenon of mass communication continually gives rise to new forms of musical knowledge and artistic creation. Globalization

has imposed distinctive rhythms of production and creation, marked by a singular efficiency in terms of global dissemination and conception. Within this dynamic, music has become embedded in the globalized landscape of industrial societies, increasingly transformed into a commodity of international market value.

This transformation has catalyzed, among other phenomena, a media-fueled hybridization of cultures and musical traditions. Yet, it is essential to recognize that not all musical cultures are equally affected by media communication. Likewise, various musical genres emerging from media culture frequently draw upon traditional musical forms to rearticulate their artistic expressions. In its strictest terminological sense,

“hybridization” refers to the blending of two distinct elements.

*** As one scholar observed¹**

« From the very beginning, I was confronted with terminological issues already shaped by interviews with composers. The multiple and often inappropriate uses of terms—frequently carrying negative connotations—and the coexistence of expressions such as ‘mixing,’ ‘hybridization,’ and ‘crossbreeding,’ cause a degree of conceptual confusion. »

Most ethnogenetic processes demonstrate that cultural hybridization can be characterized as “voluntary”—that is, the result of deliberate choices made by individuals based on free affinities and preferences for initially “foreign” cultures. At the same time, a portion of this hybridization takes place unconsciously, particularly in cases where hybrid cultural configurations predate the individual’s birth and are inherited as part of their socio-cultural identity. Moreover, the advent of globalization has inaugurated a new musical era, marked by multi-, inter-, and cross-cultural transformations sustained by

policies advocating diversity and openness. This global phenomenon has endowed traditional modal music cultures—such as Turkish, North African (Maghrebi), and Andalusian traditions—with a previously unattained international visibility. For the first time in their history, these musical traditions have transcended their conventional geographic boundaries.

Over time, the accessibility of information has empowered artists to sharpen their aesthetic discernment. This accessibility has facilitated the development of a coherent and comprehensive approach to the revalorization of so-called “traditional” music, contributing to its preservation, transformation, and renewed appreciation within a global artistic discourse. Musical hybridization assumes a distinctly positive character when it represents a genuine encounter and interaction between cultures—one that values the richness of human expression and contributes to the development of human civilization. When the Other offers us a different sonic universe—something unfamiliar yet captivating—it opens a space for

¹ Samson, Guillaume. “Jacques Bouët and Makis Solomos (eds.): *Musique et globalisation: musicologie, ethnomusicologie.*” *Cahiers*

d’ethnomusicologie, vol. 25, 2012, pp. 245–249.

listening, reflection, and transformation. This dynamic reflects what Homi K. Bhabha describes as the third space, a site of cultural negotiation where hybrid meanings emerge (Bhabha, 1994). In such a framework, intercultural dialogue is not merely an aesthetic practice but a political and epistemological act—a way to expand human knowledge, foster empathy, and cultivate a more tolerant and inclusive society.

World Music: A Globalized Expression of Cultural Interactions

Although the English word music is uncountable and has no plural form, the term World Music—coined in the 1980s as a marketing label—has come to designate a wide array of musical forms originating from outside the Western mainstream. Often misunderstood today as a category of popular music tinged with exoticism, World Music is in fact deeply rooted in the desire of artists to imagine a world without borders—a reaction against the cultural hierarchies and racial prejudices inherited from colonial history.

This musical tendency emerged as part of a broader movement toward decolonization, both in aesthetics and in consciousness. Edward Said's concept of orientalism (Said, 1978)

helps contextualize how Western audiences have historically constructed the “Other” in music, often reducing non-Western cultures to fixed, romanticized identities. World Music, when practiced ethically, seeks to reverse this logic by foregrounding collaboration, co-creation, and mutual respect. The movement has sociological and technological roots: as Steven Feld (2000) notes in his notion of schizophonic mimesis, the circulation of recorded sounds detached from their original contexts has allowed for new forms of musical recombination, but also raised questions of cultural appropriation and commodification. Jazz and World Music, though distinct in origin, share a common lineage: both arise from the aspirations of marginalized peoples and respond to historical trauma not through separation but through creativity, exchange, and transformation.

Thus, World Music might be considered one of the most emblematic musical expressions to emerge from the late twentieth century. It embodies what Nicolas Bouvier (1982) called the “necessary otherness”—the idea that identity is not built in isolation, but through the weaving of narratives and sounds from across cultural boundaries. It is

a music made of itineraries, of border crossings, of sonic entanglements that map the geographies of human encounter.

Yet tensions persist. Traditional music often affirms the spiritual identity of specific communities, grounded in ancestral memory and ritual. In contrast, modern hybrid genres frequently advocate fusion, openness, and integration—sometimes at the risk of erasing context or homogenizing difference. This asymmetry reflects deeper power dynamics that underlie cultural globalization.

What is often missing in contemporary discourse is a historically informed account of the moment when artists began to blend their musical ideas across cultural lines—not as a passing trend, but as part of a long-standing history of creative encounter. This history stretches back well before the twentieth century, particularly in the Mediterranean, where exchanges between Arab, Berber, Andalusian, Ottoman, and European traditions gave rise to some of the most enduring forms of musical syncretism.

Understanding this deeper genealogy allows us to see how some creators responded more insightfully to cultural diversity and how they

managed to amplify their voices within a global musical landscape—especially through the emergence of platforms and festivals that prioritized intercultural dialogue. Musical appropriation, however, can lead to problematic or even detrimental consequences—particularly when examined in light of the power dynamics at play between dominant musical forms and traditional repertoires (whether popular or classical in nature). These consequences vary significantly depending on the direction of appropriation. When elements are borrowed from traditional music by dominant cultural industries—typically Western or globalized—the result often involves processes of decontextualization, commodification, or even erasure of the cultural specificity of the source material. This vertical appropriation tends to reinforce existing hierarchies and perpetuate asymmetrical cultural relations.

Conversely, when the flow of appropriation moves in the opposite direction—from dominant to traditional forms—it may lead to imitation or assimilation that risks compromising the integrity and continuity of the traditional system, especially when local musicians adopt dominant codes as a means of

gaining visibility or legitimacy on the global stage. The situation becomes more nuanced—and potentially more productive—when the appropriation takes place horizontally, that is, between musical traditions that occupy relatively similar positions in the cultural hierarchy. This is often the case when exchanges occur between regional or non-Western musical traditions, where the balance of power is less pronounced and the creative dialogue can lead to mutual enrichment rather than domination or dilution. In such contexts, the process is closer to what George E. Marcus and James Clifford describe as “negotiated cultural translation”—a space where artistic borrowing occurs with awareness, reciprocity, and reflexivity.

*** Artistic Practices at the Crossroads of Multiple Cultures**

Across the experiences of different peoples, the artistic landscape inevitably reflects practices that evolve in accordance with the political and economic transformations of the time. Although cultural impact tends to influence the arts as a whole, its effects depend significantly on the socio-historical conditions of the societies in question. The flux of cultural influence requires a careful analysis of intercultural entanglement, as the

degree and nature of this impact clearly vary depending on the social models involved—whether rooted in Western structures, purely modal systems, or tonal-modal hybridities.

The phenomenon of artistic hybridization is thus linked to a constellation of internal and external cultural factors. It is, in this sense, both banal and complex. As historian Serge Gruzinski notes: -

« Banal, because it can be found at various scales throughout human history and has become omnipresent today; complex, because it becomes elusive the moment one tries to move beyond the effects of fashion and rhetorical tropes that constrain it. »

In order to produce a clear and critical understanding of the phenomenon, one must consider the impact of Western art on the cultural landscapes of the Global South. This brings into focus periods in which cultural hybridization was not merely spontaneous, but socially structured—a phenomenon that diverges sharply from accidental or unconscious forms of mixing. In recent decades, a notable artistic trend has emerged, often described as “multi-cultural art”, reflecting a renewed and growing interest in artistic expressions born at the intersection of diverse cultures.

This leads to a pertinent question: how did this phenomenon unfold in recent decades, particularly in the exchange between Western cultures and those rooted in ethnic or traditional heritages?

In Western countries—especially in contemporary Europe—the emergence of this musical and artistic current did not initially result from the introduction of new styles into the social fabric. Rather, it provoked institutional responses: the establishment of research units, academic departments, and fieldwork-based laboratories dedicated to studying art forms in regions such as Asia and Central Africa. These efforts often framed the encounter with non-Western artistic traditions within a scholarly or ethnographic context.

By contrast, in regions commonly referred to as “ethnic source” countries—such as those in the Arab world, Asia, or Africa—artistic hybridity entered local practices more organically. In many cases, this occurred incidentally, through the work of local artists who were exposed to and influenced by exogenous musical sources, particularly through migration, media, or cultural diplomacy. In multicultural societies, one can assert with reasonable confidence that

cultural and artistic activities often serve as platforms for intercultural dialogue and as mechanisms for promoting the recognition and appreciation of diversity. Artistic expression thus becomes not only an aesthetic endeavor but also a vector of social transformation.

Contemporary art is increasingly shaped by creators who explore new forms of expression and assert their presence within a global, contemporaneous artistic discourse. These artists exhibit a remarkable openness to exchange, hybridity, and intercultural interference. Their practices reflect a heightened sensitivity to the complexities of the modern world and to the profound disruptions—both cultural and geopolitical—that define our current era.

Contemporary Music: A Fragmented Aesthetic and a Challenge to Traditional Listening

Undoubtedly, World War II dealt a significant blow to the global artistic trajectory. Nevertheless, it is remarkable to observe that musicians continued to compose and experiment even during the war period, often under extremely difficult conditions. This persistent creative effort laid the groundwork for what we now refer to as the contemporary music era, which

began in the aftermath of the war, around the early 1950s. This period did not give rise to a single coherent style but rather to a plurality of aesthetic paths—radical, experimental, and often in opposition to the tonal and formal conventions of the past.

Several major currents can be identified within this postwar artistic flowering: -

1- Serial music: An extension and generalization of the twelve-tone technique (dodecaphony) developed by Arnold Schoenberg and his disciples, serialism imposed strict control over pitch, rhythm, timbre, and dynamics, reflecting a rationalist approach to composition.

2- Electroacoustic music: A field encompassing both the application of electronic and electrical technologies to acoustic sound production, and the composition or diffusion of works through electronic means. This genre radically redefined the boundaries of what could be considered a “musical” sound.

3- Musique concrète: Initiated in 1948 by French engineer Pierre Schaeffer, this practice involved assembling and manipulating recorded sounds on magnetic tape, often from non-instrumental or “concrete” sources. It marked a turning point in the detachment of

music from traditional notation and performance.

4- Aleatoric music: Emerging in the 1950s as a reaction against the rigidity of total serialism, aleatoric or chance music, championed by figures like John Cage, introduced elements of randomness and performer indeterminacy into the compositional process.

5- Minimalist music: Originating in the United States during the 1960s in contexts often shared with the visual arts, minimalism—as seen in the works of La Monte Young, Terry Riley, Steve Reich, and Philip Glass—emphasized repetition, tonal clarity, and gradual transformation. John Cage’s influence, especially in terms of conceptual openness, played a pivotal role in its development.

While these are only a few of the movements that emerged during this period, others such as acousmatic music, repetitive structures, and spectral music also contributed to redefining compositional language. However, this discussion is not primarily concerned with the stylistic discourse of these genres, but with the underlying intervallic reconfigurations and transformations within the harmonic system itself. These innovations fundamentally disrupted the traditional foundations of Western harmony, prompting new

cognitive and perceptual challenges for both musicians and audiences.

One of the most frequently leveled critiques against contemporary music concerns its perceived melodic impoverishment. Although rhythm remains present in many works, the absence of discernible melodic lines, tonal centers, and familiar harmonic progressions renders this music often inaccessible to listeners trained in the classical canon. Instead, these compositions may consist of fragmented textures, isolated noise events, or complex electronic manipulations—elements that can disorient audiences accustomed to the structural coherence of Romantic or Classical works.

Consequently, contemporary music appears to target an elite audience—those whose listening habits and auditory expectations have been consciously shaped through specialized exposure and theoretical understanding. From childhood, most people are conditioned to perceive and appreciate tonal music, characterized by a balance between melodic direction and rhythmic stability. Contemporary music disrupts this aesthetic regime, often requiring a radical re-education of the ear.

This divergence has led some scholars to view contemporary music as dehumanized, precisely because it addresses a narrow segment of the population. Critics argue that it lacks emotional immediacy, accessibility, and cultural relevance. However, this dismissal may stem more from a collective unease with unaccustomed sonic materials than from any intrinsic flaw within the music itself. In truth, the disrepute surrounding contemporary music may have less to do with its content than with a failure to contextualize it within the appropriate pedagogical and aesthetic frameworks.

Perhaps the term contemporary is too neutral, or too broad, to adequately capture the radical break that this music represents. A more fitting label might be modernist music, emphasizing its commitment to innovation, experimentation, and the exploration of new compositional frontiers.

Rethinking Traditional Music:
Between Preservation,
Transformation, and Global
Reappropriation

It is important to clarify that tradition should not be reduced to a mere stylistic fixation, nor can it be fully explained by a generalized consensus regarding musical norms. In the field of ethnomusicology, the

term traditional music has been used to designate a wide array of musical practices characterized by their phenomenal diversity, often grounded in oral transmission and tied to specific socio-cultural contexts.

Many contemporary musicologists now agree that traditional music often functions as a static product, one intrinsically linked to its socio-folkloric foundations, making it difficult to dissociate from its original cultural matrix. However, when a codified musical style is reinterpreted through an approach rooted in traditional sources—particularly in dialogue with World Music, which emerged largely from the blending of musical cultures and experimental collaborations among artists of diverse origins—the resulting soundscape often reveals a modern, exotic sonority produced by the fusion of heterogeneous instruments.

Within this framework, one could argue for a typological distinction: -

- 1- Traditional music is viewed as authentic, anchored in inherited cultural expression.
- 2- Folk music appears more eclectic, integrating localized variants and external influences.

3- World music represents a syncretic form, combining multiple traditions into new hybrid styles.

From a different perspective, it is crucial to recognize that oral tradition, often characterized by a conservative stance towards innovation, has historically played a fundamental role in the preservation of these musical forms. Unlike many contemporary musical discourses, traditional music maintains a unique spiritual dimension, especially within ethnic communities where music continues to function as a vector of identity and continuity. This spiritual underpinning has contributed to its resilience and enduring presence across the globe.

To elucidate the complex dynamics of traditional music in today's globalized context, it is helpful to consider three main orientations, each reflecting a different mode of transmission and transformation. These orientations raise a critical question: have some contemporary musical expressions already acquired the status of new traditions?

- 1- The first orientation concerns communities that reproduce tradition in its original form. This entails the faithful reactivation of inherited repertoires, using traditional instruments and performance

practices—commonly observed in parts of Asia, India, and Central Africa.

2- The second orientation pertains to societies that have preserved a traditional musical heritage but reinterpret it using modern or electric instruments. This trend is prevalent in North Africa and parts of the Middle East, where traditional modes and structures are adapted to contemporary instrumentation.

3- The third orientation includes diasporic or global communities that interpret tradition through orchestration and harmonization processes derived from Western classical or popular practices. These reinterpretations often involve hybridized idioms, merging the aesthetics of world cultures within frameworks of Western musical theory and arrangement.

In all three cases, the question of authority is central. Tradition in music, as in other forms of art, presupposes a form of normative regulation—an authority (whether cultural, institutional, or communal) that guarantees the endurance of its structure and meaning. At the same time, tradition must continuously negotiate with change, resisting total stasis while remaining legible to its originating context.

*** Conclusion**

Musical hybridization is neither a passing trend nor a mere stylistic choice—it is a fundamental mode of cultural evolution. From traditional rituals to contemporary soundscapes, from folk songs to digital experimentation, music reflects the plurality of the human condition. Understanding its trajectories means embracing complexity, contextuality, and the deeply human impulse to create across boundaries

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